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AUTHOR Diemer, Matthew A.
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ABSTRACT

When the identities of youth of color have been studied (especially African Americans), several problematic practices have been employed. Racially, African American youth have been compared to a "standard" of White American youth. From the perspective of social class, poor African American youth have been compared to the "standard" of middle class. Additionally, the experiences of poor African Americans have been overinterpreted to represent the experience of all African Americans. What is needed are fair comparisons--both on the basis of race and class. A more comprehensive model of assessing social class (Entwistle and Astone, 1994) is offered. Three recommendations in the study of identity development among African American youth are given. First, comparisons of racial groups should not be based on the assumption of White Americans as the standard. Second, comparisons between racial groups also need to take into account differences in social class. Third, more representative sampling techniques are needed in the study of African American adolescents. (Contains 25 references.) (JDM)

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Youth of Color and Identity Development:

The Impact of Socioeconomic Status

Matthew A. Diemer

Boston College

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Abstract

When the identities of youth of color have been studied (especially African Americans), several problematic practices have been employed. Racially, African American youth have been compared to a "standard" of White American youth. From the perspective of social class, poor African American youth have been compared to the "standard" of middle class White American youth. Additionally, the experiences of poor African Americans have been overinterpreted to represent the experiences of all African Americans. What is needed are fair comparisons - both on the basis of race and class. This paper argues for a consideration of race and social class when studying identity. A more comprehensive model (Entwistle and Astone, 1994) of assessing social class is offered. Consideration of all of these factors affords more precise, ethical and sound study of the identities of youth of color.

African American Male Adolescent Identity Development: The Impact of Socioeconomic Status

Identity is one of the central constructs in the field of psychology, as demonstrated by the many ways identity has been studied. For example, from a symbolic interactionism perspective, identity is a dynamic evaluation of self, which is dependent upon interactions with self and others (Mead, 1934). Bem's (1972) self-perception theory argued that people create a sense of themselves by observing how other people perceive them. However, symbolic interactionism and self-perception theory are just two ways in which identity has been studied. Identity has also been viewed as a narrative (Gergen, 1996), a developmental stage of adolescents (Erikson, 1968), an integration of selves with perceptions of future development (McCandless & Evans, 1973), and a process of racial/ethnic identification (or disidentification) (Parham & Helms, 1981). The plethora of global (e.g. theories of the self) and specific (e.g. racial identification and gender identity) theories of identity begs the question of why it is important to study identity.

Identity, a stable sense of "who I am," is needed to have any sense of consistency in the world. Swann (1987) asserted that self-consistency, the motive to have a consistent and stable sense of self, is one of the strongest motivations of humans. Without a sense of identity, we would have no sense of who we are - our past experiences would have nothing to integrate into, and have no effect on our present or future experiences. Without identity, new learning would occur "in a vacuum;" there would be no sense of who were to who we are and will be. Life would be a series of discontinuous and discrete, seemingly random, experiences. Meaningful interactions with relatives, friends, or close ones could not exist (Mead, 1934).

A discussion of the absence of identity necessitates a discussion of the presence of identity. Having a sense of one's identity is adaptive, in that it provides one with a stable sense of "who I am." Identity mediates, through avenues such as personal norms, values, and beliefs,

how we interact with our world (Spencer, Dupree & Hartmann, 1997). In turn, the outside world interacts with us, constantly shaping and re-shaping how we think about ourselves, or our identity. For example, if someone highly valued their sense of spirituality, they would be likely to attend church services. In turn, attending church services shapes identity by reinforcing the sense of one's spirituality.

In summary, the many ways identity has been studied reflects the importance of the construct. Identity allows social scientists to make guided statements about behavior and is important for healthy development. Despite identity's importance, I will argue that the study of identity among people of color has not been adequate.

The study of identity development among African American youth (Note: this pattern is true across many racial and ethnic groups, but for the purposes of this paper will focus upon African Americans) is illustrative of the flawed research that has been conducted in the Black community. This research has overlooked the impact of contextual factors (such as race and socioeconomic status) on development. Dilworth-Anderson & Burton (1996) stressed the importance of careful documentation and examination of race, ethnicity, family structure, and social class in developmental research. Historically, this practice has seldom been followed.

I believe that researchers have failed to consider two important contextual factors, race and social class (I will use the terms "social class" and "socioeconomic status" interchangeably here), in studies of adolescent identity development. First, I will discuss how researchers have employed White adolescents as a sample to which youth of other racial groups are compared. Secondly, I will discuss how researchers have failed to differentiate the impact of social class on identity development. From this discussion, I will propose that it would be more efficacious to consider both race and social class in the study of identity development.

The neglect of race in the study of identity

Racial identity is (generally) not an issue for White adolescents. Carter (1990) argued, "What is lacking in the existing literature is an understanding of how Whites experience themselves as racial beings and how their responses to themselves as racial beings affect their perceptions and attitudes about being White in western society" (p. 49). Helms (1990) argued that Whites are generally unaware of themselves as racial beings. Further, Whites are hard pressed to define their identity in positive terms (e.g. "I value the way White people are industrious"). Rather, identity among Whites is often conceptualized as the absence of characteristics of other racial groups (e.g. "I'm glad I am not Black"). Therefore, Whites often lack a conception of what their racial identity looks like (Helms, 1990).

In contrast, the identities of non-White youth "look different" from the identities of White youth (Phinney & Rotherham, 1987). Almost a century ago, DuBois (1903) asserted that the identities of Black Americans are different from White Americans in that they required a "double consciousness." Padilla (1995) argued that the development of non-White Americans differs from the development of White Americans. Gonzales and Cauce (1995) argued that some youth of color (such as African Americans) may not identify with the culture of their origin and establish a sense of racial identity that is based on negative media images of African Americans. Based on their interactions with society, African American adolescents quickly learn that race is important in the world, regardless of whether or not they think it is an issue. The resolution of racial identity is a more salient issue for African American youth, while White youth have the luxury of (generally) not being forced to think about their racial identity (Helms, 1990).

Although the racial identities of White and African American youth differ, many theorists have employed "approaches in which the developmental patterns of European Americans serve

as a standard for…data interpretation" of other racial groups (Fisher, Jackson, & Villaruel, 1998, p. 1152-1153). The practice of generalizing findings from White samples to other racial groups results in the identities of people of color being viewed as "abnormal" or in deficit to the White standard (Graham, 1992; McKenry, et. al. 1989). Bell-Scott and Taylor (1989) labeled this literature "pejorative scholarship" (p. 1). Several researchers (McAdoo, 1993; McKenry, et. al., 1989; Stansfield, 1994) have argued that "methodological practices for studying ethnic minority youth and families have not captured the specific contextual and interpersonal dimensions that contribute to and are a part of development" (Fisher, Jackson, & Villaruel, 1998, p. 1152). A second aspect of context, social class, has also been problematic in studies of adolescent identity. In the following paragraphs I will discuss how social class has been conceptualized in past research endeavors.

The neglect of social class in the study of identity

It may be argued that a neglected contextual factor in the psychological literature is social class. Recent scholars (Jones, 1999) argued that social class also needs to be considered in the study of identity development. However, Fisher, Jackson and Villaruel (1998) noted that although social class does impact development, race and ethnicity also need to be considered in the study of development. For example, even if social class was held constant across a sample of White and African American adolescents, the context would not interact with the youth equally – the racial discrimination African American youth encounter (that Whites would not) differentially impacts their development. Therefore, both race and class are important aspects of a adolescents' context, and need to be taken into consideration in the study of identity development.

Although social class is an important variable to consider in the study of development, the consideration of social class in the study of African American youth has proved problematic. Social class has served as a "methodological quagmire" in the study of African American youth. This quagmire has been manifested in two ways. First, researchers have made between-groups comparisons of middle-income White youth and low-income Black youth (please see Graham, 1992 and Bell-Scott and Taylor, 1989 for a further review of these studies). These comparisons are inappropriate because they overlook two key factors – race and social class. Secondly, researchers have made within-groups comparisons of middle class and lower class African Americans, "[grouping] Blacks into 'respectable' (middle-class) and 'non-respectable' (lower-class) elements" (McKenry, et. al., 1989). Further, McKenry, et. al. (1989) stated,

> The most apparent methodological flaw in research on Black adolescents is the use of nonrepresentative samples drawn from captive, often low-income populations (i.e. often subjects obtained from clinical settings and inner-city schools) from which the findings are then generalized to the entire population of Black youth (p. 258).

This approach has perpetuated what has been labeled "underclass views" (Bowman & Howard, 1985), in which the wide spectrum of African American experiences are ignored in favor of one social class (lower), typically from an urban area (Diemer, 1998). Both examples of inappropriate comparisons - between (White middle class and Black working class) and within (the African American working class to represent all African Americans) - fail to consider the differing impacts of socioeconomic status on the development of African American youth.

It is important to consider the problematic history of social class in studies of youth of color. With this awareness, researchers can more carefully make comparisons between and within racial groups. However, in order to make these comparisons, socioeconomic status must

be precisely and comprehensively assessed. In addition to the problems associated with inappropriate class comparisons, recent authors (Entwistle and Astone, 1994) have argued that social class has not be accurately assessed. The following section will outlines their model for assessing social class, which measures more of the dimensions that comprise socioeconomic status.

Assessing socioeconomic status

Thoughtful consideration of socioeconomic status is key in studies of development. However, socioeconomic status is difficult to assess precisely. Although socioeconomic status serves as an important marker of several variables, this same variability makes socioeconomic status difficult to operationalize. Socioeconomic status is not a construct that has meaning in and of itself. Rather, socioeconomic status serves as a marker for several key aspects of the youth's context. Generally, a higher socioeconomic status entails better school systems, less violence in the neighborhood, more financial resources for the youth's parents, and higher levels of education among parents. A low socioeconomic status characterizes (generally) poorer schools, fewer community resources, and fewer parental resources (such as the ability to help with homework or serve as vocational role models) (Coleman, 1988). Socioeconomic status serves as an expedient (albeit not perfect) way of examining several features of a youth's context. The differing features of the context, then, provide different opportunities for interaction with a youth, which afford different outcomes (such as identity development) among youth of different social classes.

Entwistle and Astone (1994) argued that the best way to operationalize socioeconomic status is to measure it along three dimensions: financial capital, human capital, and social

capital. The following paragraphs will discuss, based on Entwistle and Astone's (1994) suggestions, a means of more precisely assessing socioeconomic status along these dimensions.

Socioeconomic status is often equated with financial capital, or monetary resources. To assess this accurately, Entwistle and Astone (1994) suggest that participants be asked to assess the combined income of their household, rather than just father or mother earnings. This is needed to determine the incomes of "non-traditional" households (e.g. live-in boyfriends income, impact of child support), which are more common in communities of color. Human capital is best thought of as the parental resources. These resources can be thought of as the ability to provide assistance with schoolwork and serve as vocational role models. Entwistle and Astone (1994) argued that parent's level of education is the best indicator of human capital. Social capital represents the resources of the family structure. A "household roster" can be used to determine all the members living in the home, and how they are related to the adolescent, in order to assess the family structure of the youth.

Assessment of socioeconomic status along all three dimensions affords a more accurate assessment of social class. Entwistle and Astone (1994) argued that "it is important to use all three indicators; one by itself does not constitute a good indicator of a multidimensional construct like socioeconomic status" (p. 1527).

Summary and conclusions

The previous argument has attempted to establish that the study of African American male youth has been confounded by race and social class. Prior researchers have employed (witting or unwittingly) problematic practices that have perpetuated negative views of African Americans. This body of research has been labeled "pejorative scholarship" (Bell-Scott &

Taylor, 1989, p. 1). Through deconstructing these practices, it has been attempted to demonstrate new avenues for social scientists.

The preceding section has outlined several issues in the study of identity development among African American male adolescents. First, comparisons of racial groups should not be based on the assumption of White Americans as the standard. Acceptance of difference, rather than promotion of deficience, should define the study of identity among youth of color. Second, comparisons between racial groups also need to take into account differences in social class. If between group comparisons are to be made, some type of matching along the dimension of social class is needed. Third, more representative sampling techniques are needed in the study of African American adolescents. Sample selection must reflect the diversity within the population of African American adolescents (McKenry, et. al. 1989), rather than focusing only on poor youth from an urban environment.

With these considerations in mind, social scientists may more accurately (and ethically) study the identities of African American youth. Future researchers may consider abandoning the practice of comparing racial groups and study the variations within a racial group while examining the impact of social class. Alternately, between groups racial comparisons may be made with careful attention to social class. Another option is to focus on social class and examine its impact across different racial groups. Regardless of the methodology employed, careful consideration of race and social class are key in the study of youth of color.

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